

# H. E. SCHNAKENBERG

By LLOYD GOODRICH

*The AMERICAN ARTISTS SERIES of the*  
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART




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*Publication of the books entitled  
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ALLEN TUCKER has been postponed.  
These volumes will appear in 1932.*

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## FOREWORD

*THIS book is one of a series devoted to the work of various American artists and is published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, founded by Gertrude V. Whitney. The purpose of these books, like that of the Museum which sponsors them, is to promote a wider knowledge and appreciation of the best in American art.*

*For assistance in preparing this volume for publication, we wish gratefully to acknowledge our indebtedness to the Kraushaar Galleries for information regarding paintings used for illustration, to The Arts magazine for the loan of its files of photographs, and to the museums and private collectors whose paintings, reproduced in this book, add so notably to the value of the illustrations.*

JULIANA R. FORCE, *Director*  
Whitney Museum of American Art



Photograph by Paul Outerbridge, Jr.

H. E. SCHNAKENBERG

# H. E. SCHNAKENBERG

BY

LLOYD GOODRICH

HENRY E. SCHNAKENBERG occupies an unusual position in contemporary American painting. Although belonging to what is loosely called the "modern" wing, he is not a member of any particular group, and his work is in no sense radical. In a day when the prevailing trend is away from realism, he is one of our ablest and most complete realists. His balance and reserve contrast with the romantic extravagance of many of his contemporaries. But he is far removed from orthodox conservatism. Always an independent, his individuality has kept him away from the academy. His realism is more vital than that of the academician, being the product not of standardized formulas but of a sincerely personal vision.

Schnakenberg has never, like the popular academic artists, settled into the well-worn and profitable groove of a specialized type of subject. He cannot be pigeonholed as a painter of portraits or figures or landscapes or still lifes, for he practises all these *genres* impartially. Interested in many different aspects of the world, he makes each picture an individual record of something he has seen and enjoyed.

His subjects are marked by a characteristic simplicity and freedom from affectation. The landscapes reveal a genuine, unaffected love of the country, especially of the intimate farmland of northern New England, with its sunlit valleys between rolling hills, its quiet streams, its white farmhouses and gray barns, its covered bridges, its meandering dirt roads. This country he likes to paint on days when it is flooded with strong summer sunlight and the blue sky is piled with white clouds. But he is no impressionist; he is less interested in the transitory effects and moods of nature than in her solid realities. No poetic hazes obscure the shapes of things; everything is definite and clearcut. There is none of

the excessive softening and prettifying of nature indulged in by the disciples of Monet. There is a lyrical note, but it is a robust lyricism, preferring the everyday world and the strong, clear light of noonday to mauve Whistlerian twilights. In his almost matter-of-fact unsentimentality and his interest in things rather than moods, Schnakenberg goes back of impressionism to the sturdy naturalism of a still earlier generation, that of the Hudson River painters, the first native American school of landscape.

And unlike the poetical painters of yesterday, Schnakenberg does not confine himself to pure, idyllic landscape. Sometimes he pictures the outskirts of small towns, with their chaotic mixture of rusticity and urbanism—quarries, gravel pits, factories, railroad stations, telephone poles—all the supposedly commonplace features of semi-rural life which the earlier painters avoided, thereby missing half the character of the American countryside. He likes the marks of human habitation and labor, and the homely side of country life: barns, vegetable gardens, farmyards. And he is fascinated by the little things of nature, the miniature world which one can see by focussing on a limited section of reality. He will paint, life-size, hens and roosters scratching the dirt of a chicken run; or a cat emerging from a jungle of flowers and weeds, holding a chipmunk in her mouth; or he will make a picture out of nothing more grandiose than a mullen plant by the roadside.

The same enjoyment of the varied beauty of small, intimate things, appears in his paintings of flowers, whose delicate details are rendered with fidelity and without any attempt to impose an arbitrary pattern. In his still lifes, a favorite type of subject, he assembles contrasted objects, ordinary and rare—shells, books, statuettes, ornate vases, colored stuffs, Victorian *objets d'art*—placing them often against the geometrical simplicity of bare walls and white woodwork. Their selection is governed by a cultivated appreciation of their sensuous qualities of form, color and texture, and they are arranged with painstaking and affection-

ate care to display these qualities to the utmost advantage. There is no effort to startle or amuse by arresting juxtapositions, in the da-da manner. The artist's pleasure in the aesthetic value of these things of daily use and adornment, is as simple and uncomplicated as that of Chardin.

Schnakenberg's portraits and figure pieces are chiefly of women. In his case the romantic idealism of the average American artist of an earlier generation, in regard to the female of the species, has been replaced by a saner and more natural attitude. The women he paints are neither the etherealized visions of the romanticist nor the incredibly smart creatures of the fashionable portraitist. They are human beings, pictured with a pleasantly casual informality. Without being sentimentalized, they have an air of youth, health and attractiveness. Individuals rather than types, they are not flattered, but neither is there any attempt at caricature. The artist's interest is not so much in the analysis of character as in the presentation of the physical existence of his sitters.

Schnakenberg's work in general shows little tendency toward satire, literature, or comment on life. He looks upon his subjects from a primarily aesthetic viewpoint, as interesting and attractive figures or objects or places to contemplate and paint; his attitude toward them is more or less detached. His art has little subjective content; his aim is not to express his own emotions directly but to create satisfying images of the world as he sees it. He himself does not obtrude in his pictures.

His style is primarily naturalistic, thereby differing from the current fashion, which is all in the direction of non-representational art. He evidently does not fear the accusation of being "photographic"—the bugaboo of the modern artist—reasoning perhaps that beneath a naturalistic exterior may exist the same aesthetic qualities that appear in the most abstract painting, as is proved by the work of more than one artist of the past. His vision is singularly direct, and close to familiar objective reality. He does not distort nature or bend her to an arbitrary pattern; his modifications are less radical. He selects from her what he considers



aesthetically significant. His naturalistic leanings are corrected by an ascetic strain in his temperament, an innate predilection for the severe and simple.

These two tendencies, healthy naturalism and selective aestheticism, determine his style, which varies considerably, depending upon which is dominant. In his still lifes, for example, where the subject itself is selective, he achieves a fine austerity and purity of style. When he paints nature in the rough, as in his landscapes, his work is inclined to be less selective, more naturalistic and detailed, but with a compensating warmth and life. His style has not yet hardened into any particular mould, and this dualism in his artistic make-up—the conflict between the claims of naturalism and formalism—has not been entirely resolved. It is a more complex problem for this artist, whose mind is open and receptive to nature, than for one whose mind is closed to her.

His naturalism, however, is never of the surface variety. The average naturalistic painter of the last generation was chiefly concerned with the mere superficial appearance of things, the illusive effects of light and shadow, the actuality that the camera records; but Schnakenberg, like most of his generation, is interested in the reality of solid forms in space. He retains the realistic light that has been abandoned by so many modern painters, but while it permeates his compositions, it is never allowed to become the whole subject of the picture, as with the impressionists. He does not allow it to break up the solidity of his forms, but rather uses it to create them. No matter what the light, his objects always retain their integrity.

Schnakenberg is a patient, steady builder rather than a brilliant improviser. His pictures are the result of careful thought and planning. Nothing is slurred over or left vague; every detail is definite and precise. His paintings are carried to a point of completion that is rare nowadays. At a time when witty suggestion is the rule, and artists are inclined to practise a kind of sophisticated shorthand, he pursues an almost old-

fashioned thoroughness of execution. He gives us the fully completed object instead of the mere suggestion of it, with the result that his painting is more satisfying than that of many of his more light-minded colleagues.

With all his considerable artistic cultivation, his work is marked by a certain essential innocence of vision. It is entirely free from fashionable mannerisms, either academic or modernistic. He does not consider it necessary, in order to be "modern," to disrupt his planes *à la* Cézanne, or to paint cardboard buildings and embroidered trees, or to affect an artificial naïveté. Nor does he strain after decorative effect, consciously flattening things out to achieve it. His pictures always have decorative value and are handsome in pattern, but he places three-dimensional values first, realizing that the most genuine decorativeness results not from deliberate intention, but is a by-product of larger qualities.

He paints a world in depth. His sense of space is highly developed; the relation of the various objects to one another and to the space that surrounds them, is sensitively felt. But his work is especially distinguished by his feeling for the total harmony of the picture. All the elements that go to make up the composition—form, line, color, texture, space, light—play their parts perfectly in an harmonious whole. The strength of his art lies in this just balance of many different elements, more than in the power of any one of them.

Color to him is more than a merely emotional or decorative affair; it is a property of form and space, to be used in coördination with them rather than as an end in itself. Like the other elements in his work, it owes its strength to logic rather than unguided impulse. The color of his pictures is as carefully thought out as everything else in them; and the result, if more reserved than that of the purely instinctive colorist, has a fine harmony. Although not spectacular or sensuously seductive, his color is always sympathetic, strong, and soberly resonant. Of recent years his painting has evolved from the cool ascetic grays and earthy hues

of his early work to a richer and more varied scale, which every year takes on greater force and clarity.

Technically, Schnakenberg is one of the most accomplished of the so-called "modern" painters. His work is remarkable for its finished and scrupulous craftsmanship. But he makes no cheap display of clever brushwork; his technique is subordinated to more important qualities.

Schnakenberg's development has been steady and consistent. His earliest phase, revealing in its austerity and its note of mysticism the influence of his teacher Kenneth Hayes Miller and of Ryder, was soon succeeded by his present realistic style, in which he has shown a continuous progress. A comparatively young man, he is still developing, and to judge by his latest work, in the direction of a broader, more mature creative realism. One has the feeling that when more fashionable talents seem passé, his balance and sober honesty will have the same force that they have today.



## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

HENRY E. SCHNAKENBERG was born in 1892 in New Brighton, Staten Island, New York, his father being of German birth and his mother of American birth and Scotch-English ancestry. He was educated at the Staten Island Academy, and spent a few years of his youth in the insurance business; but his artistic tendencies were too strong to allow him to be contented in a business career and he commenced the study of art when he was twenty-one, at the Art Students' League of New York, working for the first season in the night classes. The Armory Exhibition of 1913—a landmark in the lives of many artists—caused him to decide definitely to be a painter and next season he began to devote his full time to study at the League under Kenneth Hayes Miller, with whom he continued to work for several years. In 1917, upon the entrance of the United States into the War, he joined the army medical corps and served for two years in this country and in France. After his return to America in 1919, he began his independent career as an artist, and also taught at the League for three years. Most of his painting has been done in New York and in Manchester, Vermont, where he spends part of every summer. He has travelled extensively abroad, beginning in childhood, particularly in France, Spain, England and Germany. He has also painted in Florida, in the Southwest and in the West Indies. In his travels he has worked in water color, a medium which he uses frequently.

His paintings have been seen in one-man exhibitions in New York at the Whitney Studio Gallery, Valentine Gallery (in 1926), and C. W. Kraushaar Art Galleries (in 1927 and 1929). A large exhibition was held in Dallas, Texas, in the Spring of 1930.

His work is represented in many private collections and in the following public institutions: The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia; California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco; Wadsworth Athenæum, Hartford; Highland Park Society of Arts, Dallas, and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

He is a member of The Art Students' League of New York, New York Society of Independent Artists and the American Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers.

He has from time to time written critical essays and reviews, particularly for *The Arts*.

L. G.

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

MARBLE DANCER, 1930

H. 45 inches    W. 36 inches



CAT AND KITTENS. 1930

H. 45 inches    W. 30 inches





FELICIA MEYER, 1930

H. 50 inches    W. 36 inches





THE WHEATFIELD. 1930  
h. 36 inches w. 45 inches



M.E. Schriener

CHICKEN YARD, 1930  
h. 30 inches w. 36 inches





M. E. Schaeffer

VERMONT LANDSCAPE, 1928

H. 22 inches w. 26 inches

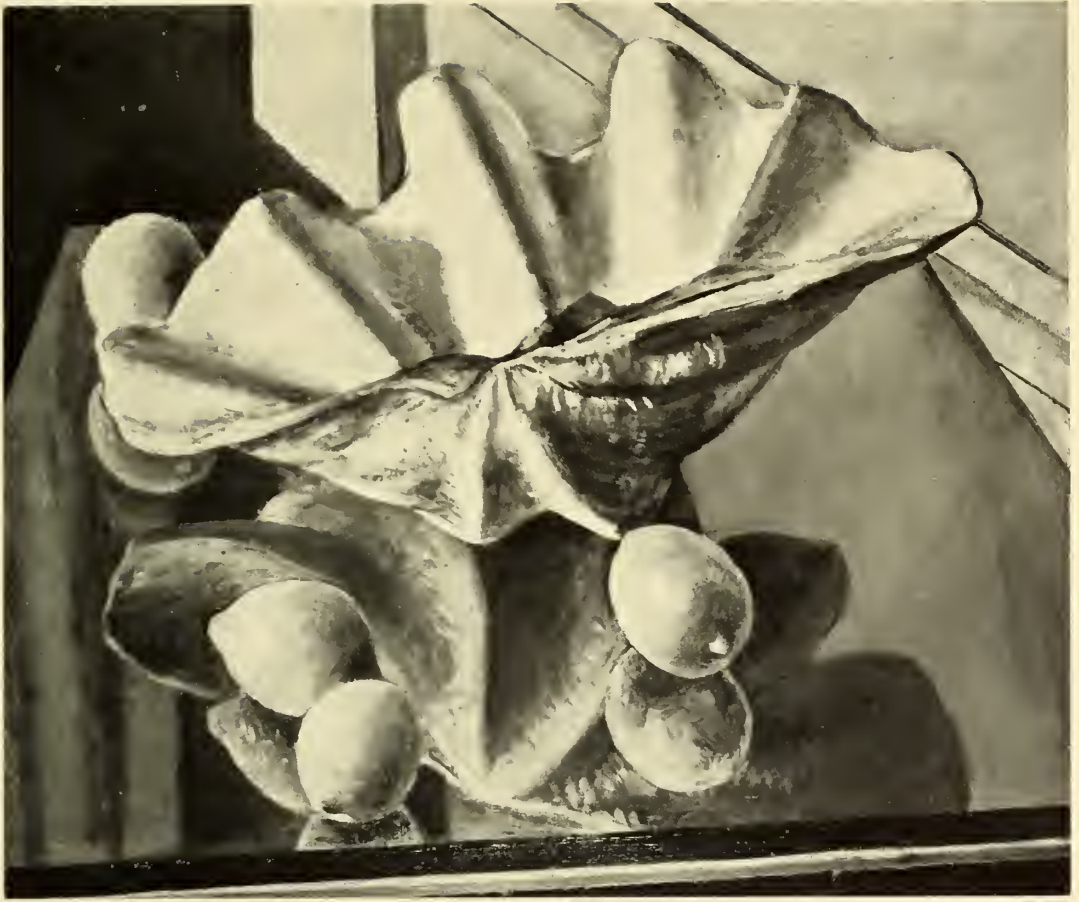


SHELL AND LEMONS, 1929

H. 20 inches    W. 24 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*





SEGOVIA, 1929  
H. 50 inches    W. 36 inches



PORTRAIT—MRS. JAMES M. OSBORN, 1927

H. 42 inches    W. 30 inches

*Collection of Mr. and Mrs. John Montgomery  
New York*





MULLEN, 1927

H. 36 inches    W. 30 inches

*Collection of The California Palace of the  
Legion of Honor, San Francisco*





MONKEY, 1927  
H. 26 inches    W. 20 inches

*Private collection*





THE METTOWEE VALLEY, 1929

h. 36 inches w. 45 inches

*Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Siegfried Gabel*

*White Plains, N. Y.*



AIR PLANTS, PORTO RICO, 1927

H. 30 inches    W. 36 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*





PORTRAIT OF GIRL IN WHITE COAT, 1926  
h. 30 inches w. 24 inches





BETTY AS A GYPSY, 1926

H. 70 inches    W. 36 inches

*Collection of Highland Park Society of Arts  
Dallas, Texas*



STILL LIFE, 1923

H. 24 inches    W. 24 inches

*Collection of The Pennsylvania Academy  
of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Pa.*





CLAUDIA IVANOVA, 1924

h. 36 inches w. 30 inches





P E A R S, 1 9 2 1

H. 20 inches    W. 16 inches

*Collection of Whitney Museum of American Art*



ANOTHER DAY, 1914

H. 9 inches    W. 10 inches

*Collection of Mr. and Mrs. L. H. Shearman*  
*New York*



COVERED BRIDGE (*Water color*), 1930

*Collection of Miss Elise Shearman, New York*





H. S. Schenck, Jr.

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